



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

11. — *Prose Essays by Poets.* 1. *Victorian Poets.* By EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN. Boston : James R. Osgood & Co. 1876.  
 2. *Essays and Studies.* By ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE. London : Chatto and Windus. 1875.

How many poets have flourished in England during the last forty years? One hundred and fifty, says Mr. Stedman; a surprising number truly; and he has painfully enumerated and criticised all of them. The criticism of poets on contemporary poets is always interesting to contemporary readers; but it can in most cases neither survive its subjects, nor prolong their lives; and a great part of the labor spent on this book can result in securing no more distinct fame in future for the crowd of rhymers who lived under Victoria than is now enjoyed by the crowd who lived under Anne.

“Sons of a day, just buoyant on the flood,  
 Then numbered with the puppies in the mud.  
 Ask ye their names? I could as soon disclose  
 The names of these blind puppies as of those.”

It is only a great poet who can preserve the memory of a little one. Mævius and Pye are indeed immortal; but then Horace and Lord Byron were critics of a different order from Mr. Stedman. The interest of this book will be found concentrated on a few names, conspicuous, if not illustrious, among the writers of the present day. Those selected for special notice, beyond the few lines conscientiously given to each of the smallest poetasters, are for the most part those which the ordinary reader would expect and approve as representative; not, perhaps, without a protest against calling Landor a Victorian poet at all. Hood, Proctor, Arnold, Mrs. Browning, Buchanan, Swinburne, Rossetti, and Morris are given a prominence which to very many readers will seem the due of each of them, and the strong and weak points of each are pointed out, in most cases, with a delicacy and discrimination which the admirers of any can hardly quarrel with. The attractiveness of different parts of the book to different readers must vary exactly as tastes in poetry vary; criticism is apt to be uninteresting when the subject criticised is unfamiliar; and the part which will be most popular will be that which treats of the poets generally read; a description certainly not including all of those just mentioned: while others, to whom Mr. Stedman rightly allots the most space of all, are of the greatest importance, as well by their merits as by their reputation with the public; every one has his own opinion about them, and is anxious to compare it with the opinion of others.

Among the Victorian poets two names stand out pre-eminent ; and every reader of poetry will turn at once to see what the critic has to say of Tennyson and of Browning. Of the first he writes lovingly and at length ; and the most original, as well as the most interesting part of the book is that in which the inspiration of some of the sweetest and most popular of Tennyson's verses is traced to its source in the idyls of the Greek pastoral poets. The likeness in sentiment and expression between the familiar English lines and Mr. Stedman's charming and accurate renderings of Theocritus and Moschus cannot fail to strike the most careless reader ; and the more attentive admirer of the modern poet must be impressed with a new conviction that we may still derive some pleasure, if not profit, from the study of those classical models on which such abundant contempt is poured by many of the instructors of youth in the present day. Modern education is nothing if not scientific, and, as it is pleased to call itself, practical, and doubtless it has useful results. Yet we may believe that earnest study of beetles, or ozone, or the theory of rent would have counted for less in the production of "The Princess" than the recollection of a few lines in a dead language. The true friend of liberal education will be duly respectful to the beetles ; he will see that his children are taught to measure them in millimetres and describe them in several living tongues ; but he will not permit their study wholly to efface the memory of that nobler learning from which the greatest poets of our time are not ashamed to borrow.

Mr. Stedman's observations on Tennyson's other writings show a natural appreciation increased by a careful study, and expressed in a clear, if not a striking style. No admirer of the poet can deny that he receives his full meed of praise from a critic deeply impressed with his excellence, yet not too much impressed to be discriminating ; witness the remarks on "Maud."

But if Mr. Stedman does full justice to Tennyson, he is far less satisfactory in his treatment of the other great poet of our day. It is clear that he has but small liking for Browning, and no sympathy with him ; he is wholly in the dark as to what the poet means to express, and naturally finds the expression defective ; and defective indeed it is, if regarded as his critic regards it, as a defence of "the elective affinities against impediments of law, theology, or social rank." Browning's poetry is no more the outcome of such a formula than of the binomial theorem ; but though it may fail to convey ideas which the poet never thought of, it is mighty in the expression of thoughts, of questions, and of answers which the reader's mind often first recognizes as belonging to itself when presented in a few com-

pressed and powerful lines, once read and never forgotten. It is this power of saying what every one thinks, and thinks so unconsciously that he never even attempts to say it, that makes the true poet ; and it is the power of saying the same things in perfect words that makes the great poet ; nor should greatness necessarily be denied if the words are not always accurate in rhyme or musical in sound.

To Mr. Stedman, beauty in the workmanship of verse is all-important ; and it is this which makes his praise of Browning very perfunctory ; it seems as if he were continually wishing to say, as he does say of certain poems which he names : “ The language of the simplest of these is so intricate that we have to be educated in a new tongue to comprehend them ; their value lies in the human nature revealed under such fantastic and to us unnatural aspects developed in other times.” Here are half a dozen lines of one of these : —

“ That low man seeks a little thing to do,  
Sees it and does it.  
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,  
Dies ere he knows it.  
That low man goes on adding one to one,  
His hundred 's soon hit.  
This high man, aiming at a million,  
Misses a unit.  
That, has the world here, — should he need the next,  
Let the world mind him !  
This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed,  
Seeking shall find him.”

Is this fantastic, or intricate, or unnatural to these times ? Perhaps it is the last : then so much the worse for these times ; but surely it is poetry, and that of no common order.

It is this same admiration for manner and comparatively slight value for thought in poetry, which allows our critic to pass with scarcely a word over Clough ; a poet unfortunately best known by his lame and impotent English hexameters, but whose other verses, and in particular his religious poems, more truly and forcibly represent the spirit of some of the best minds of this generation than those of any other writer.

The theory on which Mr. Stedman founds his conclusions seems to be as follows. The scientific and poetic views of the world, always opposed, were never more widely opposite than now. Throughout the period under discussion, science has been advancing with long strides towards truth, and poetry is left lagging far behind and rather out of repute. Reason has vanquished imagination. In the light of science it is no longer easy to idealize the facts of the world. Yet

Mr. Stedman expects the time to come, perhaps soon, when poetry will, out of these new and hard materials, which science is furnishing, again build up splendid structures for the imagination to inhabit; but meanwhile the transition process from the old to the new themes occasions a period of embarrassment, doubt, wavering, and consequent lack of inspiration in the poetry of to-day. The poets, therefore, the lovers of beauty, devote their genius to perfecting modes of expression, smoothing their verses, inventing intricate and lovely metres, polishing their style. Hence the only greatness of such a period is found in technical proficiency; the difference in value of its poets is proportioned to their varying faculties of expression.

This is, on the whole, a just account of the character of our more modern poetry. Melody, rhythm, voice, picturesqueness, are qualities which belong to our poets in as full measure as Mr. Stedman asserts. But why should it not be clearly recognized that these are but inferior attributes of the muse, after all? It is one thing to prattle on and on with Morris, or to roll on one's tongue the rich romances of Tennyson, but quite another thing to cry with the voice of Byron or soar with the wing of Shelley. These facts are hardly kept in view so clearly as is best in Mr. Stedman's special criticisms, though well stated in his general essay. The readers of the book will find that it is by a rather Victorian canon — that is, the ability to be Victorian and easy — that these Victorian poets are judged. By this they are praised, by this condemned. On this principle Swinburne is lauded, and on this principle Browning meets with severe criticism.

We do not imagine that Mr. Stedman really intends to rank Mr. Swinburne's achievements so high, or Mr. Browning's so low, as he appears to do. Browning seems almost excluded from the rank of poet, at least of poet properly so called. This is doubtless a result of the "technical" standard by which the author confessedly judges. But certainly Browning cannot be so dismissed, and any critical definition of poet which does not cover his case, is not on the whole a satisfactory one. Considering his keenness of thought, his exuberant imagination, his subtle power to take hold of his readers, the vividness of his best scenes, the strong lines of his characters, we can scarcely avoid calling him the strongest, truest poet of the Victorians.

On the other hand, a rather undue stress is laid on the peculiar merits of Swinburne. This, again, proceeds from the technical nature of the canon used. So far as melodious numbers, attained however by the strangest tormenting of language, contribute to poetry, Swinburne is the most poetical of all our poets, the most musical of all our bards; but his verse has all the limitations as well as the powers

of music. His poems tinkle and sing, but what effect do these sweet vowels and delicate consonants bring? Do we not go our way, and straightway forget what manner of words these were? The praise lavished on him by Mr. Stedman is indiscriminate. If Swinburne has sung sweetly of beautiful things, he has also raved foully of horrible things. Even these latter verses, Mr. Stedman thinks, "are quite too fine to lose." The only excuse which suggests itself for his comment is a charitable hope that he does not understand them.

But to know Mr. Swinburne's merits and defects it is not necessary to turn to his poems. They speak loudly for themselves in his volume of prose essays, the title of which stands second at the head of this notice.

Mr. Swinburne is a master of fine words; and this is how he uses them. "It is said, sometimes, that a man may have a strong and perfect style who has nothing to convey worth conveyance under cover of it. This is indeed a favorite saying of men who have no words in which to convey the thoughts which they have not, . . . but it remains for them to prove, as well as assert, that beauty and power of expression can accord with emptiness or sterility of matter, or that impotence of articulation must imply depth and wealth of thought. This flattering unction the very foolishhest of malignants will hardly in this case" (he is speaking of Mr. Dante Rossetti's verses) "be able to lay upon the corrosive sore which he calls his soul: the ulcer of ill-will must rot unrelieved by the rancid ointment of such fiction." Whether or not the possible coexistence of an elaborate style and a frivolous or base subject can be proved from the works of the author of *Eden Bower* and *Love-Lily*, we will not stop to inquire; but will salve our malignant and cankered soul with the contemplation of the very book from which the above extract is taken. It affords a new proof, if any were needed, of the author's astonishing power over the English language, and of his utter waste and abuse of that power. It is not indeed so far perverted, as in many of his poems, to the vivid picturing of delirious depravity; though even here traces are not wanting of the author's perpetual prurient longing to express the unexpressibly hideous. But the only thing in the English language less wild than Mr. Swinburne's verse is his prose; and its perfect wildness cannot be for a moment forgotten, even in the surpassing luxuriance of his style. Serious criticism of his matter is impossible. What shall be said to a man who calls Victor Hugo the master poet of the age; to whom Mr. Rossetti's sonnets recall those of Shakespeare, to the grievous disadvantage of

the latter, in respect of noble fulness of form and stately and shapely beauty of build ; who considers Byron's Vision of Judgment the final perfection of his satirical powers ; and who is forced to admit Dante and Milton to be less great poets than Homer and Æschylus, Sophocles and Shakespeare, inasmuch as these latter had the decency to keep "the very skirts of their thought, the very hem of their garments, clean from the pollution of this pestilence," by which polite epithet is intended "the most hateful creed in all history," namely, the Christian ? Such folly (and of such the book is full) is only made to appear more foolish by the eloquent and musical language in which it is often clothed.

Mr. Swinburne has written some magnificent and many fine verses ; he has written, too, much sound and fury, signifying nothing ; and he has also sung forgotten monstrosities of vice in words which by their very extravagance happily fail to convey any adequate idea of the vileness of the imagination which suggests them. It is painful to see that among his various styles he steadily tends to refuse the good and choose the evil, and seems ambitious to live in the memory of man rather as a foul-mouthed and foul-minded lunatic than as a poet ; as author of the Essays and the Anactoria, rather than of the Atalanta in Calydon.

A comparison of these two volumes of essays can hardly be attempted ; the criticisms of the American poet are calm, well-bred, scholarly, and reasonable, even if the reasons are not always convincing ; those of the English can only be likened to the utterances of what he himself would prettily call "a blatant Bassarid." On the whole we prefer our countryman.

"T is wiser being good than bad,  
"T is safer being meek than fierce,  
"T is fitter being sane than mad."

- 
12. — *William Godwin ; His Friends and Contemporaries.* By C. KEGAN PAUL. With Portraits and Illustrations. In two volumes. Boston : Roberts Brothers. 1876.

THIS has been called the Age of Biographies, and it is no bad qualification for an age, if it be well deserved. A good biography is a thoroughly good thing, and if properly done should surpass any but the best of novels in interest. A biographer does his work well in proportion as he possesses the gift or art of making his subject a living soul, clothed with human nature, flesh and blood, and of like pas-